

Waiting for the dawn

Jane Beverley

The room spins; red and gold flames circle around my head; tongues of fire spiral upwards, higher and higher to a dizzy summit, then plunge down, crashing with all their burning force onto my face. Fire consumes me, its eager mouth feasting on my smouldering flesh. I scream in agony, a long wavering cry that tears through the stillness of the night air.

A rough hand seizes my shoulder and shakes me into consciousness. I open my eyes slowly. My body is bathed in sweat; I can feel its clammy moisture clinging to my skin. I look up; my eyes catch sight of the hand laid on my shoulder. Its ugliness repels me; the pale light of the moon, Diana, Virgin Huntress, gleams coldly off the black hairs that cover the hand. My back aches in an involuntary shudder.

Convinced I am awake, the man removes his hand and stands upright, his face shrouded in darkness. He turns and leaves silently. It is the silence that tortures me, the yearning to speak with someone, the need to hear a human voice addressed to me, even if in anger or command. The soldier turns and leaves silently.

Then a violent crash bores its way into the depths of my senses. The door is slammed shut. I hear the iron grating of the bolt as it is forced home; the sound pierces my eardrums and beats down my mental barricades. Alone, I weep. For so long now, I have pretended to be strong; I have watched as all the things I hold dearest have been torn away from me. Always I kept my emotions frozen. Now, here, the facade becomes vulnerable, cracks and crumbles; here, in this living nightmare, here in this isolation where there is no privacy, here, at last, the ice melts and I weep.

Tears course down, marking a slender path on the stony, barren pallor of my cheeks. They flow down to my chin, where they mingle with the sweat that has formed there, the product of my fevered nightmare. The saline, bitter liquid drips slowly from my face; the drops fall onto my gown, soaking through the cloth onto the flesh beneath. The moon's pale light lingers over my white dress. White! The colour of innocence and purity. A bile of disgust rises to my mouth, more bitter than the salt sweat and tears that drip incessantly from my face. Innocence! Purity!

How many times have I watched unmoved, witnessed the murders of those closest to me, and said nothing, nodded in tacit acquiescence? I am as guilty as him, that man, that monster – my husband, my brother. Innocent? Pure? I, who married my own brother?

The room grows lighter, the black terror of the night waning into a grey half-light, that threatens persistently. Dawn will be here soon. The moon still shines clear; I can see her full face staring serenely into the room. Outside the building, I hear the sound of an exchanged greeting, words of friendship, a joke even. A watch has ended. One soldier retires wearily to his barracks, thinking perhaps of his distant family. Another devotes himself to the task of guarding me. Am I so dangerous?

A sudden longing grips me – for my mother. It is so long since I thought of her, yet here, unbidden, comes a desire for her embrace. My mother, the most beautiful woman in Rome, they said. When I was young, I used to watch in awe as the maids combed out her flowing hair, straightening its tangled black cascades. She would turn to me and smile, her lips glowing, painted a rich, voluptuous red. Her arms would stretch out and pick me up. I used to nestle there secure, caressed in her soft, white arms. But she would tire of me as she did of everything. Bored, she would return me to the floor and forget me. I have tried to forget her, my poor, misguided mother, dying in terror and pain.

It was then that my father seemed to dwindle. Always kind, he withdrew more and more into his personal pain. Then, setting a grotesque precedent for my own unholy marriage, his aged lust drove him to marry his own niece, Agrippina.

How we hated you, Agrippina, sly, cunning, plotting for power, worming your way into the closest confidences of my father. But, as for your son, we adored him. It was always he who led in our games and we would follow willingly. He was a beautiful boy, his childish features framed by curling locks, his large eyes lighting up his laughing face, Agrippina's son, my adopted brother, soon my husband.

A screech disturbs me. I start and try to peer out of the opening in the wall. The call is repeated – the cry of a solitary bird, hovering over the desolate shores. Outside this building lies a stony expanse of barren land, the island of Pandateria.

My father, my dearest father, I remember how, befuddled with wine as usual and smiling vaguely, you raised to your pale lips a mushroom dipped in a thick sauce, rich in venom. Your wife watched you and smiled appreciatively. Your fate was sealed. Then, my true brother, dear Britannicus, you too died at a feast before my eyes; your face was distorted and blotched; your body lay hideously contorted, the head dangling obscenely over the side of the couch. I lay there watching, sprawled at my husband's feet. I watched you die and I did nothing. He was staring at me, his bright eyes burning into me, daring me to speak. And, Britannicus, I smiled at him; though my whole body was crying and aching in anguish, I forced my lips to smile at your murderer. Britannicus, will you ever forgive me? Do you curse me as you wait in Hades?

At that banquet I remember how I turned my eyes to Agrippina and saw etched on that powdered face the grim lines of panic. The beast had outgrown its keeper; the animal, uncaged, was set free to devour the world. Next the creature turned on its own mistress, its own mother. Agrippina, I loathed and dreaded you, but to die as you did, I would not have wished that even on you, murdered by your own child, the fruit of your own womb.

The faint glow of dawn pervades the room. The monotony of black and grey and white is relieved by occasional hints of colour, points of individual life. The tip of the sun's disc creeps over the horizon; a soft rose light tints the room, my prison. The room is small; the only light comes from the opening high in the wall. It stinks of neglect; rot and mould crawl up the walls and a foul stretch haunts every corner.

Morning will not be long. The sun will rise fully to glare down on the rocky island, providing no warmth, only a harsh, unbending gaze. I know in my heart that the order will come today. Fear grips me, engulfs me, its icy fingers clutching at my shaking shoulders. Tears begin to flow afresh from my aching eyes, my body shudders with the spasms of violent sobbing.

I hear sounds, force my sobs to quieten; my ears pounding with the throb of blood surging through my body, I listen and wait.

I hear footsteps echoing on the bare surface of the island; I they come nearer and then stop.

I hear an exchange of greetings, words of friendship, a joke even.

I hear the door opening, the rusty bolt grating on my nerves as it is forced back. Two soldiers enter, grim-faced, iron-clad. I know that this is the end, the summons, the order to die. My lungs bursting, I shout out: "I'm no threat to him. I'm not his wife, only his sister. Please ..."

Only his sister. I remember how we played together once, how Britannicus and I adored you. How you would urge us to take part in some new fantasy you had created, how we readily obeyed, following your glowing face unquestioningly. Nero, we loved you, I loved you. Nero, I love you still. My husband, my brother, what does it matter? Pity me, save me and we shall rule together, leaders of your great empire, husband and wife, emperor and empress, brother and sister.

I know now why I smiled at Britannicus' death, why my lips forced themselves into that bitter smile. Nero, my darling, I will forgive you anything, everything. But pity me, save me, love me ...

Horror and terror mingle in my mind. My screams contain no words now. I scream in agony, a long wavering cry that tears through the stillness of the new day. Through the opening hewn into the rough stone wall, I see the golden sun come into his own, Apollo, brother of Diana, emperor of the skies.

My scream dwindles into a heaving sob. The soldiers each lay a hand on my shoulders and drag me out of the room, my prison.

My lips, bleached white in fear, move silently and noiselessly I murmur my final word.

"Nero."

*Jane Beverley wrote this, the winning entry in the **Omnibus** short story competition, when in the lower sixth form at Sheffield High School.*